Fascinating Family Life of Judge Woodford McDowell

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Judge Woodford G. McDowell was one of the pioneer settlers in the Fairbury area. He founded the villages of Avoca and McDowell and was elected a Livingston County Judge. He also spent about four years in Nebraska and established the new town of Fairbury, Nebraska. Judge McDowell then retired to Washington, DC.

Judge Woodford McDowell's life story begins with his birth in 1818 in Scioto County, Ohio. In 1832, his family emigrated to Illinois, and he became one of the first pioneer settlers in the Fairbury area. Judge McDowell was fourteen years old when he arrived in the Fairbury area.

Unfortunately, just two years after the McDowell family arrived in Fairbury, the patriarch, William McDowell, died at 48 in 1834. William McDowell was a veteran of the War of 1812 and was buried in the Avoca Cemetery. Judge McDowell was 16 years of age when his father died.

In 1842, Woodford G. McDowell married Elizabeth Lane. Woodford was 24, and Elizabeth was 19 when they married. Elizabeth was also born in Ohio. Woodford and Elizabeth McDowell had seven boys and two girls. Only the two girls lived to be adults.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth McDowell died at the age of 42 in 1865. The children of Woodford and Elizabeth McDowell were all adults when she died. Woodford McDowell was 47 when his first wife died.

Two years later, in 1867, Judge McDowell married Marion L. Stone. Both Woodford and Marion were 49 years of age when they married. They had no children.

By 1868, Woodford G. McDowell had observed several things. He saw how the little village of Avoca was wiped out when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks about five miles north of Avoca. Fairbury was founded and grew rapidly, so Avoca quickly disappeared. Woodford McDowell also saw how Pontiac grew after it became the county seat in 1837. Woodford McDowell realized a great deal of money was made when relatively inexpensive farmland was converted into city building lots.

Judge McDowell decided to go to Nebraska and try to predict where he could start a new town that would be on a future railroad and become a county seat. Judge McDowell successfully founded the new town of Fairbury, Nebraska, and made a great deal of money. The new town was named after his hometown of Fairbury, Illinois, and was incorporated in 1872.

After just seven years of marriage, Marion McDowell died in Fairbury in 1874 at age 56. She was buried in Graceland Cemetery. At age 56, Judge McDowell became a widower for the second time. The same year his second wife died, Judge McDowell married Anna Elizabeth Chandler.

Anna Chandler was born in 1840 in Ohio. Unfortunately, her father died when she was just two years old. In the 1850 U.S. Census, she was ten years old and lived with her mother and two siblings in Lacon, Illinois.

By the 1860 census, Anna Chandler had married J. L. Mitchell and lived in Lacon, Illinois. Mr. Mitchell was a clerk born in New York. Ten years later, in the 1870 census, Mr. Mitchell disappeared from the scene. Mrs. Anna Mitchell lived with her 64-year-old mother, Levisa Chandler, in Lacon, Illinois. Mr. Mitchell and Anna Chandler apparently had no children.

After living in Fairbury for 13 years, Judge McDowell and his wife, Anna C. McDowell, decided to retire to Washington, D.C., in 1887. Anna McDowell had a widowed sister who married a judge and lived in Washington, D.C.

By the 1880s, Judge McDowell was a relatively wealthy man. He owned farmland in Nebraska and Illinois. When they lived in Fairbury, Anna McDowell started to get involved with many different women's philanthropic groups. When they settled in Washington, DC, Woodford and Anna McDowell joined the Metropolitan Methodist Church. Anna continued participating in many charitable groups.

Around 1895, a young woman named Mary Elizabeth Mellor began teaching at a missionary school in the village of Unalaska in the territory of Alaska. The City of Unalaska is the main population center in the Aleutian Islands, west of what is now the State of Alaska. Miss Mellor was 22 years old in 1895.

In 1897, Ada Mellor joined her sister, Mary E. Mellor, as a teacher at Unalaska. The two sisters remained there until 1898. Anna McDowell's church group sponsored this type of missionary work.

In 1898, Judge McDowell was 80, and his wife, Anna McDowell, was 58 years of age. Anna never had any children of her own. Anna McDowell likely took an interest in Mary E. Mellor because she was like a daughter she never had. By 1898, Judge McDowell and his wife, Anna McDowell, adopted Mary E. Mellor. In the 1900 Census, 26-year-old Mary Elizabeth Mellor was listed as the adopted daughter. No record was found to indicate the adoption was legally recorded.

Evidence that Judge McDowell was wealthy is shown in the 1900 Census. In that Census, Virginia Roots was their 23-year-old black cook. Frederick Tyler was their 34-year-old black servant.

Judge Woodford G. McDowell died in 1904 in Washington, DC, at the age of 86. His wife, Anna McDowell, was 64 at the time of his death, and his adopted daughter, Mary E. Mellor, was 31.

Estate planning is challenging when you have multiple marriages and children. Judge McDowell left specific tracts of Nebraska farmland to his two living daughters in his will. He stipulated that his wife, Anna McDowell, receive the income from this farmland until she died. Judge McDowell left the balance of his estate to his wife, Anna McDowell. No mention was made of adopted daughter Mary E. Mellor.

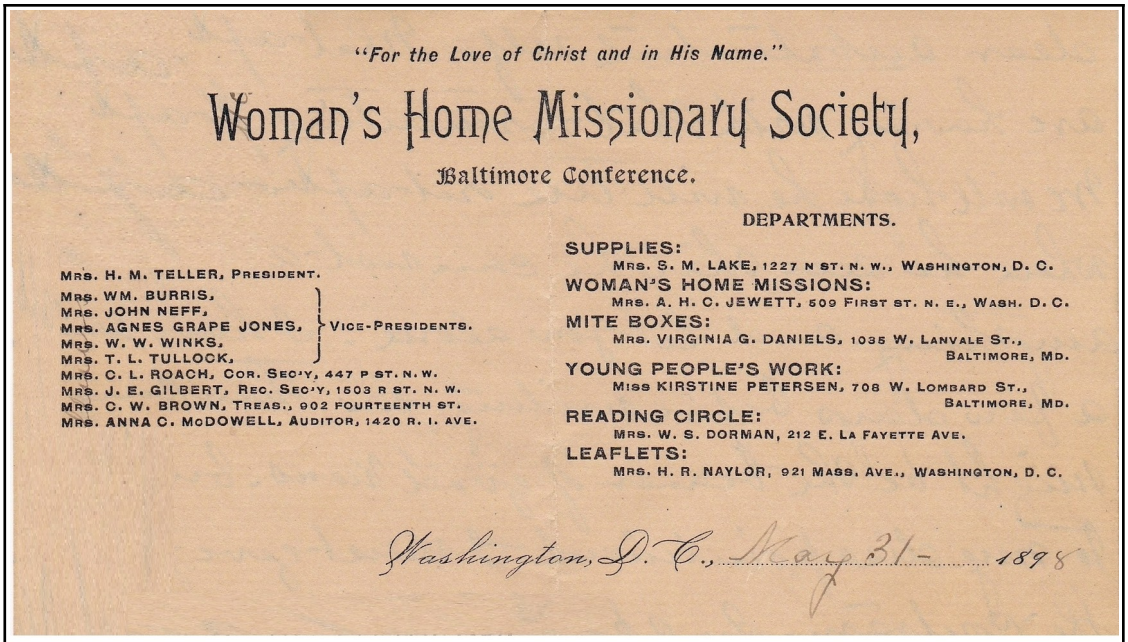
Anna McDowell, Judge McDowell's third wife, lived for six more years after the Judge died. A 1910 newspaper article stated that Anna McDowell left $1,000 to each of Judge McDowell's surviving daughters. She also left the balance of her estate to her adopted daughter, Mary E. Mellor. Woodford and Anna McDowell were buried in the Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

A copy of Anna McDowell's will was recently obtained from Washington, D.C. officials. Unfortunately, her will does not contain a specific list of assets that the adopted daughter inherited. Anna McDowell likely owned the house in Washington, D.C., and farmland in the Fairbury area. Her adopted daughter, Mary E. Mellor, probably received a significant inheritance when she died. The house owned by Judge McDowell in the Washington, D.C., area has been torn down and replaced by a modern-era building.

Because she was so active in many different philanthropic causes, Anna McDowell's death was widely reported in numerous newspapers.

Mary E. Mellor married briefly and then divorced. When she was 46, she married a second time to Ira Price, a 63-year-old University of Chicago professor. She continued her philanthropic work until she died in 1962 at the age of 88.

Judge McDowell was one of the pioneering settlers in the Fairbury area. He had an interesting family life, including three wives, nine children, and an adopted daughter who did missionary work in Alaska.



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Washington, D. C., May 31 1898

In 1898, Anna McDowell used this stationary to write a letter to her adopted daughter, Mary Elizabeth Mellor, who was stationed in Unalaska, Alaska, as a missionary teacher. Note that Anna McDowell was the Auditor of the Women's Home Missionary Society. Mrs. Anna McDowell later became President of this group.